

# MA THE CLEVELAND MUSEUM OF ART

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PRESS RELEASE

*Dickinson*

August 27, 1987

## GEORGIA O'KEEFFE GIFTS

September 4 - November 15, 1987

Five major paintings by Georgia O'Keeffe (1887-1986) were chosen by the artist as her bequest to The Cleveland Museum of Art after her death. They will be exhibited at the Museum for the first time from September 4 to November 15 with two other paintings by O'Keeffe that had earlier entered the Museum's permanent collection. The exhibition will be in Gallery 36.

The five paintings Georgia O'Keeffe selected for the Cleveland Museum are oils on canvas that represent important periods in her artistic development.

They are:

White Pansy (1927), 36-1/8 x 30-1/8 inches

Sunflower, New Mexico I (1935), 20 x 16 inches

Cliffs Beyond Abiquiu, Dry Waterfall (1943), 30 x 16 inches

Dead Tree with Pink Hill (1945), 30½ x 40¼ inches

It was Yellow and Pink II (1959), 36 x 30 inches

The two paintings, also oils on canvas, already in the Museum collection are Morning Glory with Black (1926), 35-13/16 x 39-5/8 inches, and White Flower (1929), 30-1/8 x 36-1/8 inches.

Georgia O'Keeffe's bequest of more than 36 of her most prized paintings to eight major American museums--besides The Cleveland Museum of Art, they are the Metropolitan Museum and the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the Art Institute of Chicago, the Philadelphia Museum of Art, the Brooklyn Museum, the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, and the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.--is now being distributed by the foundation established to receive and administer her estate.

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### The Paintings

White Pansy, like the two paintings already in the Museum collection, is one of O'Keeffe's powerful flower paintings from the late 1920s, a period of especially satisfying and memorable work. Her flower paintings are generally noted for their sensual, even sexual, resonances, although O'Keeffe herself always insisted that she was painting exactly what she saw and felt when she looked at a flower and flatly denied that any of her flower paintings were metaphors for female sexuality.

The focus of the flower paintings shifted in the 1930s and 40s. The Sunflower series, done in the middle 1930s, from which Sunflower, New Mexico I comes, has the thickly painted richness of a van Gogh sunflower. In the Cleveland picture, the vivid yellow petals against the bright blue Southwest sky are painted with vigorous brushstrokes.

Cliffs Beyond Abiquiu and Dead Tree with Pink Hill, both from the mid-1940s, are major examples of her New Mexico landscape paintings. These works appear to be influenced by the character of the landscape itself, with was an irresistible lure and stimulant to her over many years. Most characteristic of these paintings are her emphasis on the configurations of land rather than sky, high horizons and silhouette forms, and a frontal viewpoint that brings the features of the landscape parallel to the picture plane and thereby compresses any sense of deep space.

It was Yellow and Pink II is from a series in the late 1950s and 60s which is considered her most esoteric, but which she described simply as having been prompted by her delight in seeing the world spread out below her airplane window as she traveled. She would make sketches, usually one-and-a-half inch squares, and would later develop them into paintings. The colors are often overlaid with other hues, markedly different from the clear colors and sharp outlines central to most of her painting.

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### The Life

Georgia O'Keeffe wrote: "Where I was born and where and how I have lived is unimportant. It is what I have done with where I have been that should be of interest." There is little chance in this year that marks the centenary of her birth--November 15, 1887 in Sun Prairie, Wisconsin--that much will be deemed unimportant about one of America's most individual artists, and arguably, its greatest woman painter.

O'Keeffe declared that she decided at the age of 12 to be an artist. She studied at the Art Institute of Chicago, the Art Students League in New York, William Merritt Chase's classes, and Teacher's College of Columbia University. Later describing all this as useful in making her familiar and fluent in handling materials, she nonetheless believed that nothing she had learned made her want to paint anything but what she saw, according to the shapes that she had in her mind. Flowers and landscapes, both the towering buildings of New York and the mountains of New Mexico, are her most characteristic subjects, and her handling of them a distinctive mix of specific detail and bold abstraction.

What has intrigued so many observers is the stubborn and insistent independence of both her life and her work. Her paintings show few influences, from either her contemporaries, the history of art, or the European sources so compelling to her American peers. This is not to say that she was not very much influenced and helped by Alfred Stieglitz, the photographer whose gallery at 291 Fifth Avenue, New York, offered to many Americans during the first decades of the 20th century their initial view of contemporary American and European art. It was Stieglitz who first exhibited O'Keeffe's work, in 1917--over her objections because, she said, she had made them for herself, not for others--and Stieglitz who captured her personal as well as professional interest. They married in 1924, after his wife consented

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to a divorce. By the end of the 1920s she had begun spending most of her summers working in New Mexico, where she settled and made her own life.

Although they had lived apart more than together, she was at Stieglitz's bedside when he died in 1946. She lived in New Mexico until her death, March 6, 1986.

The exhibition is organized by Tom Hinson, curator of contemporary art.

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For additional information or photographs, please contact the Public Information Office, The Cleveland Museum of Art, 11150 East Boulevard, Cleveland, Ohio 44106; 216/421-7340.